

## Editorial 6 - *The Reading Loft* – Learning and Using Non-verbal Language Through the Use of Picture Books

### *Reading Your Mind*

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I am not one of those people who savor long conversations on the telephone. Face to face discussions are an entirely different matter. I usually find them stimulating, entertaining, and uplifting. I have wondered at the gulf in my reactions to these two basically similar forms of communication, the one seeming ever so "dead" to me and the other so "alive".

I understand that others may find my view perplexing. Many teens and even adults seem to do their best, and I might add, longest, conversation work on the phone. I appreciate this diversity, but I still have a hard time understanding what is so great about handicapping your own communication.

Through countless hours of giving therapy, teaching classes and workshops and endless interaction with family and friends, I have learned to monitor not only the content of the interaction, but also the non-verbal process. Without the information available to me in the non-verbal cues, I feel like I am only getting part of the picture.

Perhaps my lazy side is to blame. I am perhaps unwilling to work to gain the most from the auditory presentation. After all, there are signals in the voice: pacing, volume, voice inflection, intensity, etc.. The visually handicapped have shown to what extent one can learn to discriminate the subtle aspects of speech. It is the non-verbal aspects of communication which I require. Some social scientists have argued that up to 80% of all communication is non-verbal and it is this part that makes things so much easier for me.

Just think how difficult life

would be if people didn't have some ability in immediately identifying the meaning and significance of the behavior of others. These individuals would have difficulty in judging peoples' moods and attitudes, would often be insensitive to the atmosphere of social situations and would always be doing or saying the wrong thing at the wrong time or place.

The positive fact is that most people are able to learn the signal system. People observe the ways in which others use their bodies and space to communicate, and thus place less reliance on the voice alone. The artifacts or aesthetic cues which each of us gives out is an additional part of this signal system.

Dr. Esther Miskoff has elaborated on the need to analyze the skills necessary for successful non-verbal communication. Since many children and adults are weak in the cue system and fail to respond to normal social signals a task analysis of the non-verbal communication patterns is critical in the training process.

Some children have difficulty in recognizing that certain racial expressions have meaning and that a raised eyebrow may be given as a sign of disapproval. A parent's wave of the hand may be a sign for going back and certain postures may mean approval or rejection. The use of space for communication becomes very apparent when someone invades someone else's private space by standing too close, or tries to join in on a closed group of close friends sharing confidences. Personal territory can also be invaded if people are being stared at.

Clothes, hair styles, the length

of a skirt or cut of a blouse, the amount and application of cosmetics, all contribute to aesthetic cues system and may suggest approach or avoidance, safety or caution, friend or foe.

Most people take their training in non-verbal cues for granted. One recognizes that raised, expanded arms tends to mean openness, and dropped shoulders or arms folded means closure. But what about a person who is asked to raise their arms in a hold-up? Certainly other cues such as facial expression might reveal the person's anxiety and concern.

So who is best able to teach such skills to those who have difficulty learning them, the parent, the teacher, television? All can be very impactful, however, if careful attention is not given to the non-verbal details of interactions, some children will just not learn the discriminations because human interactions go by so fast.

I believe it is the talented illustrator of children's picture books who is perhaps the most gifted professional to convey information on the non-verbal communication system. He or she does this through the illustrations they create to parallel the storyline. It is this artist who has studied the relationship between mood and feelings and facial expressions and body postures. Often new dimensions of a story are communicated through the drawings and by their careful study many non-verbal discrimination can be learned. In this context it must be remembered that a picture book loved by a child will be reviewed in detail many, many times. Coupled with such careful scrutiny, training in the non-verbal cue system as it



relates to the story-line can help individuals fill gaps in their own abilities.

An excellent example of the artist's skill is found in drawings of Tomie de Paola. By facial expressions, distancing, posturing, and the aesthetic cues of the person and the environment he conveys so

much more about the story. Readers must learn to create their own pictures in their mind eventually, but the training must begin early.

In the tale "Strega Nona" Big Anthony gets into all kinds of trouble by not doing as he is told. The emotional turmoil of his

experience is vividly illustrated in the drawing. The emotion illustrated often doesn't even require a story-line. See if you agree with the emotions given with each drawing and then try to tell yourself what the details are that provided the clues, to the emotion.



Content  
Peaceful  
Happy



Put out  
Insulted  
Mad



Happy  
Joyous  
Thrilled



Concentrating  
Self assured  
Focused



Proud  
Cocky  
Smug



Perplexed  
Anxious  
Hopeless



Bewildered  
Out of control  
Blown away



Scared  
Nervous  
Anxious



Confused  
Perplexed  
Questioning



Nauseated  
Sick  
Regretful

As we learn to use children's books to teach children to make sense out of the complexity and confusion of their emotions, we should not forget the power of the illustration to help in that process. Learning the non-verbal signal system is critical for social acceptance and survival. The children's book illustrator has provided a powerful tool for such training, and adults responsible for socialization of children need to become aware of this and learn to use it with children who require it.